

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

November 9, 2006

SANTA MONICA BAY RESTORATION PLAN: SOLSTICE CREEK HABITAT RESTORATION

File No. 00-117

Project Manager: Kara Kemmler

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$77,366 to the National Park Service for habitat restoration in Solstice Canyon, Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area, to implement the Santa Monica Bay Restoration Plan.

LOCATION: Solstice Creek Canyon, Santa Monica Mountains, Los Angeles County (Exhibit 1)

PROGRAM CATEGORY: Resource Enhancement

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: Regional Location Map

Exhibit 2: Project Area Map

Exhibit 3: SMBRC Resolution 06-04 (April 20, 2006)

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution, pursuant to Sections 31251-31270 of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes disbursement of an amount not to exceed seventy-seven thousand three hundred sixty-six dollars (\$77,366) to the National Park Service (NPS) to undertake exotic species control and native riparian habitat restoration in Solstice Creek Canyon, to implement the Santa Monica Bay Restoration Plan, approved by the Conservancy on August 2, 2001. This authorization is subject to the condition that prior to the disbursement of any funds, the NPS shall submit for the review and written approval of the Conservancy’s Executive Officer a work program, budget, and schedule; and the names of any contractors to be employed in carrying out the work.”

Staff further recommends that the Conservancy adopt the following findings:

“Based on the accompanying staff report and attached exhibits, the State Coastal Conservancy hereby finds that:

1. The proposed project is consistent with the purposes and criteria of Chapter 6 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code (Sections 31251-31270) regarding enhancement of coastal resources.
 2. The proposed project is consistent with the Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted by the Conservancy on January 24, 2001.”
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PROJECT SUMMARY:

Conservancy staff recommends that the Conservancy authorize disbursement of up to \$77,366 to the National Park Service (NPS) to remove exotic plant species and plant natives to restore the riparian habitat along Solstice Creek within the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area (SMMNRA) of coastal Los Angeles County (Exhibits 1 and 2). This project will be undertaken to implement the Santa Monica Bay Restoration Plan, approved by the Conservancy in August 2001.

Solstice Creek is a lovely stream with alder-sycamore-oak riparian habitat. It has been determined by fisheries experts to have high potential for re-occupation by the southern steelhead once barriers are removed. The National Park Service (with funding from the Conservancy and with help from the Resource Conservation District of the Santa Monica Mountains, Heal the Bay, and the California Conservation Corps) has removed eight in-stream barriers in Solstice Canyon (4 low-water Arizona crossings and 4 check dams). These barrier removals opened up approximately 1.5 miles of perennial stream habitat that will be available to the endangered steelhead trout once the 2 culverts downstream are removed or modified. There are plans to modify the remaining barriers by Fall 2007.

The stream habitat is threatened by a number of aggressive non-native plants, particularly *Euphorbia terracina* (carnation spurge) and *Vinca major* (periwinkle) beneath the riparian canopy and in adjacent uplands and *Cyperus involucratus* (umbrella sedge) within the streambed. Other species of concern at the site are *Conium maculatum* (poison hemlock) and *Foeniculum vulgare* (fennel) in adjacent uplands, *Tropaeolum majus* (nasturtium) beneath the riparian canopy and *Carduus pycnocephalus* (Italian thistle) in locally disturbed sites. These plants affect riparian communities in a number of ways, including:

- Crowding out of native species, which results in changes in ecosystem processes such as nutrient cycling;
- Prevention of establishment of native seedlings after disturbance, resulting in decreased ability of the riparian canopy to reestablish;
- Alteration of natural hydrological processes through suppression of streamside erosion processes and slowing of streamflow causing unnatural scouring and deepening in some areas and excess sedimentation in others and potentially leading to loss of spawning gravels for steelhead;

- Reduction in forage quality potentially resulting in a reduction in invertebrate food sources available to steelhead.

Exotic vegetation removal and native plant revegetation will be performed in Solstice Canyon from the entrance at Corral Canyon Road to the Tropical Terrace ruin approximately 1.5 miles upstream from the park entrance, which is the full extent of potential steelhead rearing habitat. The project area will extend 300 feet on either side of the stream and cover approximately non-native infestations within an area of approximately 100 acres (Exhibit 2).

In April 2005 and 2006, the Conservancy provided a total of \$260,000 for the barrier removal project, however, funds are still needed for exotic species control and native plant restoration following barrier removal. The goals of this project are to restore the landscape to a more natural vegetative state through eradication of the above named exotics within and adjacent to the stream and replanting with native species, and to replace riparian canopy cover in areas damaged by heavy equipment during barrier removal.

At its April 20, 2006 meeting, the Governing Board of the Santa Monica Bay Restoration Commission (SMBRC) approved the NPS's request for a grant of \$77,366 of Proposition 12 funds administered by the Coastal Conservancy for projects within the Santa Monica Bay watershed for this project (Exhibit 3).

SITE DESCRIPTION:

The Santa Monica Bay watershed, one of the nation's most highly urbanized regions, encompasses approximately 400 square miles subdivided into separate sub-watershed drainages. The Santa Monica Bay watershed is divided into two major topographic areas: the Los Angeles coastal plain and the Santa Monica Mountains. Bordered on the north by the Santa Monica Mountains divide, on the east by Griffith Park, on the south by Point Fermin, and on the west by the eastern portion of Ventura County, the watershed encompasses residential areas, commercial and industrial areas and undeveloped open space lands, primarily within the Santa Monica Mountains. There are 28 separate drainage basins within the Santa Monica Bay watershed.

Southern steelhead trout were once documented to occur in Solstice Creek. However, road crossings at Pacific Coast Highway, Corral Canyon Road and small check dam structures and low-water crossings prevent the migration of fish. Aside from these barriers riparian habitat and water quality in Solstice Canyon, are considered excellent. In 1999, a report by the National Marine Fishery Service (NOAA-fisheries) determined that conditions were suitable for steelhead spawning and rearing. Funding has been provided for the removal of the dams and low-water crossings and adequate funding is available for the modifications for the two culverts downstream of NPS property. Restoration of the riparian habitat along the stream corridor will ensure that healthy habitat is available and conditions are suitable for spawning steelhead once they are allowed to return to the stream.

PROJECT HISTORY:

In recognition of the need to protect Santa Monica Bay and its sub-watersheds, in May, 1988, the State of California and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (US EPA) included Santa Monica Bay in the National Estuary Program (NEP). Established under the Water Quality Act of

1987 and managed by the US EPA, the NEP includes more than two dozen significant estuaries and coastal water bodies nationwide.

As a NEP, the Santa Monica Bay Restoration Project (SMBRP) is charged with assessing the Bay's pollution problems, and with producing the Bay Restoration Plan to serve as the blueprint for the Bay's long-term recovery. In 1995, the Santa Monica Bay Restoration Plan was approved by the State of California and the US EPA. The Bay Plan includes 250 actions, including specific actions focused on habitat conservation, enhancement and restoration, pollution prevention and treatment control, and assessment, education and monitoring.

The Bay Plan includes several goals, including: (1) reducing pollutant loadings to and prevent degradation of the waters of Santa Monica Bay; (2) reducing human health risks associated with swimming in or harvesting seafood from the Bay; and (3) restoring, rehabilitating and protecting the marine ecosystem, living resources and biodiversity of the Bay and its watersheds. Specifically, the Bay Plan has identified the protection, restoration, and creation of wetlands within the Bay as a major goal of the project.

The Safe Neighborhood Parks, Clean Water, Clean Air and Coastal Protection Bond Act of 2000 (Proposition 12) earmarked \$25,000,000 to the Coastal Conservancy for restoration of Santa Monica Bay in accordance with the goals and priorities of the Bay Plan. The Coastal Conservancy approved the Bay Plan on August 2, 2001.

Proposition 12 requires the Bay Watershed Council, the stakeholder board of the Restoration Project, to determine project eligibility and grant priorities. Working with Conservancy staff, the Santa Monica Bay Restoration Project staff has solicited project proposals that would achieve the goals of the Bay Restoration Plan and address its water quality and natural resource protection objectives. The project being recommended for funding here has been approved for funding by the Bay Watershed Council and Santa Monica Bay Restoration Commission (Exhibit 3).

PROJECT FINANCING:

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| Proposition 12: Santa Monica Bay Restoration Plan | \$77,366 |
| National Park Service (in-kind) | \$6,000 |
| California Conservation Corps (CCC) | \$19,440 |
| Total Project Cost | \$102,806 |

The source of Conservancy funds is an appropriation to the Conservancy from Proposition 12, the "Safe Neighborhood Parks, Clean Water, Clean Air and Coastal Protection Bond Act of 2000," for projects to implement the Santa Monica Bay Restoration Plan.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

Chapter 6 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code (Sections 31251-31270) provides for the Conservancy's participation in a program of coastal resource enhancement. The proposed authorization for implementation of the habitat restoration project would facilitate the restoration and enhancement of fish migration corridors and spawning habitat and riparian resources in the Solstice Creek watershed of Santa Monica Bay that have become degraded due to invasive exotic plants and other intrusive activities. The proposed project would also lead to the enhancement of the natural and scenic character of the area, and the ability of the watershed to support steelhead salmon and other wildlife species.

Accordingly, the proposed project is consistent with Section 31251, under which the Conservancy may award grants to public agencies and nonprofit organizations for projects that seek to remedy loss of natural and scenic values because of natural or human-induced events.

Public Resources Code Section 31253 provides that the Conservancy "may provide up to the total cost of any coastal resource enhancement project. . . ." Staff is recommending that the Conservancy contribute 70 percent of the funds needed to carry out the project. As a federal agency, the National Park Service is a "public agency" within the meaning of §31017 and is therefore eligible to receive a grant from the Conservancy.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S STRATEGIC PLAN GOALS & OBJECTIVES:

Consistent with **Goal 5 Objective A**, the proposed project will help protect, restore and enhance biological diversity in coastal areas by restoring sensitive habitat along Solstice Creek, an important watershed of Santa Monica Bay and by promoting a partnership among various local, state and federal public agencies in the efforts to restore Solstice Creek.

Consistent with **Goal 5 Objective B**, the proposed project will help protect, restore and enhance biological diversity in coastal areas by restoring an important section of the Solstice Creek stream corridor linking coastal habitats with upland habitats in the Santa Monica Mountains. In addition, the native vegetation along Solstice Creek provides suitable habitat and important wildlife movement connectivity to other areas of the Santa Monica Mountains.

Consistent with **Goal 5, Objective C**, the proposed project will help protect, restore and enhance biological diversity in coastal areas by eradicating non-native invasive species that threaten native coastal habitats and by promoting outreach and education to students and other volunteers about non-native species.

Consistent with **Goal 6 Objective A**, the proposed project will improve water quality, habitat and other coastal resources within a priority coastal watershed by enhancing riparian habitat. It will also serve to enhance the park visitor's experience.

Consistent with **Goal 6 Objective B**, the proposed project will improve water quality, habitat and other coastal resources within a priority coastal watershed by preventing erosion and thereby reducing sediment input into Solstice Creek and Santa Monica Bay and thereby improving water quality to benefit coastal resources.

The Santa Monica Mountains are cited in the Coastal Conservancy's *Strategic Plan* (2003, at page 56) as a locus for Goals 5 (Coast/Ocean Habitat) and 6 (Wetlands, Rivers & Watersheds) of the Plan.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA & GUIDELINES:

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines, adopted on January 24, 2001:

Required Criteria

1. **Promotion of the Conservancy's statutory programs and purposes:** See the "Consistency with Conservancy's Enabling Legislation" section above.
2. **Consistency with purposes of the funding source:** These projects will be funded with monies appropriated to the Conservancy from Proposition 12 for implementing the Santa Monica Bay Plan. The proposed project is consistent with the Bay Plan and this project has been approved by the Santa Monica Bay Restoration Commission (Exhibit 3).
3. **Support from the public:** Implementation of the Santa Monica Bay Restoration Plan has widespread public and agency support. The Santa Monica Bay Watershed Council includes members from private industry, the general public, community environmental organizations, as well as local, regional, state and federal agencies. The Solstice Creek restoration has the support of elected officials including State Senator Sheila Kuehl, Assemblywoman Fran Pavley and Los Angeles County Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky, public agencies, including the Resource Conservation District of the Santa Monica Mountains and the Department of Fish and Game, and environmental organizations, such as Heal the Bay and California Trout.
4. **Location:** The proposed project is located within the Solstice Creek watershed which drains into Santa Monica Bay. The proposed project would benefit stream and riparian wetland habitat resources in the Solstice Creek watershed within the coastal zone of the Malibu/Santa Monica Mountains area, the upper portion of which does not have a certified local coastal program (LCP) and the lower portion of which lies in the City of Malibu's LCP area.
5. **Need:** The non-native and invasive species at this site threaten riparian habitat and creek stabilization in the Solstice Creek watershed. Action to remove the exotic species and revegetate the area with native species will prevent bank erosion and enhance habitat in the canyon. Funds have been obtained for the barrier removals (including \$100,000 NPS funds), which are now complete. However, funds are still needed for exotic species control and native plant restoration. Conservancy funding is needed to allow the NPS staff to implement this project.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** Solstice Creek is a part of the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area which includes 153,075 acres and is the world's largest urban national park. The project is also in the watershed of the Santa Monica Bay, which has been identified by both the State of California and the US EPA as a coastal water body of

national significance. Southern steelhead have been designated as an endangered species under the federal Endangered Species Act. Solstice Creek is within the area designated as critical habitat for this species (termed an Evolutionarily Significant Unit, or ESU, by the National Marine Fisheries Service, which has jurisdiction over the steelhead under the federal Endangered Species Act). The Department of Fish and Game has established restoration of the southern steelhead as a statewide priority. Additionally, restoration of native vegetation and protection of riparian habitat is one of the priorities of the Southern California Wetlands Recovery Project.

Additional Criteria

7. **Urgency:** The barriers have recently been removed from the creek and the stream corridor is more vulnerable to invasion from exotic species due to disturbance from construction. In order to maintain the quality of the riparian habitat, it is essential to remove exotic species as soon as possible and plant native species. In order to achieve optimum success and to minimize water needs, planting must occur in the fall–winter season.
8. **Resolution of more than one issue:** The impact of the proposed project encompasses stream and riparian resource enhancement, improved water quality, and protection of spawning habitat of a federally-listed endangered species.
12. **Readiness:** NPS has propagated thousands of local native plants in its nursery and is ready to begin work as soon as the proposed project is approved.
13. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** The Conservancy has been involved in resource protection, enhancement, and restoration projects within the Santa Monica Bay watershed for more than a decade, including projects focused on the remaining coastal wetlands within the Bay. The Conservancy provided funding and project support for the planning, design and environmental review of the fish passage barrier removals in Solstice Creek. The proposed project will help further the goals for the Solstice Creek watershed and steelhead recovery efforts.
15. **Cooperation:** The Santa Monica Bay Restoration Project is a cooperative venture involving a broad range of interested and affected stakeholders including private industry, citizens, environmental groups, and local, regional, state and federal agencies. In this case, the National Park Service has been working very closely with numerous agencies (California Fish and Game, Coastal Conservancy, CalTrans, City of Malibu, California Conservation Corps, Heal the Bay, Santa Monica Mountains Resource Conservation District), land owners and elected officials to gather support, funding and cooperation for the restoration of Solstice Creek both within and outside the park.

CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL COASTAL PROGRAM POLICIES:

The proposed project is to be undertaken within the Santa Monica Mountains area in the coastal zone. The lower portion of the project lies within the City of Malibu's certified LCP area and the upper portion is in an area that does not have a certified LCP. Thus, the project will be analyzed

for consistency with Coastal Act policies and Malibu LCP policies.

The proposed project would be consistent with the policies contained in Sections 30230 and 30231 of the Coastal Act. Section 30230 states that “[m]arine resources shall be maintained, enhanced, and where feasible, restored... Uses of the marine environment shall be carried out in a manner that will sustain the biological productivity of coastal waters and that will maintain healthy populations of all species of marine organisms adequate for long-term commercial, recreational, scientific, and educational purposes.” Section 30231 states “[t]he biological productivity and the quality of coastal waters, streams, wetlands, estuaries, and lakes appropriate to maintain optimum populations of marine organisms and for the protection of human health shall be maintained and, where feasible, restored. . .” Consistent with these policies, this project would restore the sensitive riparian habitat and quality of Solstice Creek, sustain and enhance its biological productivity, and provide habitat suitable for healthy populations of steelhead that re-enter and inhabit the creek. For these reasons, the project is consistent with the policies of the Coastal Act.

This project is also consistent with the Malibu Local Coastal Program Land Use Plan (LUP) policies, including those that call for protection of Environmentally Sensitive Habitat Area (ESHA) against significant disruption of habitat values (§3.8 and 3.23), prescribe natural buffer areas around parklands (§3.24), and encourage habitat restoration and invasive plant eradication to prevent soil erosion and stream siltation (§3.45) or protect and enhance habitat values (§3.25 and 3.50). Invasive plant eradication and native habitat restoration are a permitted use in an ESHA under the LCP’s Local Implementation Plan. In Section 4.2 Marine and Land Resource Protection, the LUP recognizes the importance of both sensitive marine and land resources, including the terrestrial riparian, wetland and associated upland habitats. The LUP includes several policies requiring the conservation, restoration and enhancement of these important coastal resources. The proposed project would enhance natural values along the creek and riparian corridor of Solstice Canyon.

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

The proposed project is categorically exempt from the provisions of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) under 14 Cal. Code of Regulations Section 15333 because it consists of a project not to exceed five acres in size to assure the maintenance, restoration, enhancement, or protection of habitat for fish, plants, or wildlife and (a) there would be no significant adverse impact on endangered, rare or threatened species or their habitat pursuant to section 15065, (b) there are no hazardous materials at or around the project site that may be disturbed or removed, and (c) the project will not result in impacts that are significant when viewed in connection with the effects of past projects, the effects of other current projects, and the effects of probable future projects.

Staff will file a Notice of Exemption upon approval of the project.